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Conflict Theory and the Analysis of Religious Experience

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Abstract

This paper is a theoretical presentation of religious experience as the fundamental element of religion and in the study of religion(s). It states that religion or religiousness is a characteristic of human beings who have an attraction to an objective reality outside of humans but considered Ultimate, Divine, and Sacred in essence and action. Humans generally consider themselves dependent on this Ultimate Reality for their being and sustenance. This Reality is considered to be in communication with humans who nonetheless respond in diverse ritual forms. This communication is a form of experience that, like other experiences, is a source of knowledge not equally given to all. The experience takes many shapes. Whatever shape it takes is subject to interpretation. Both the experience and the way it is interpreted can, and most of the times, lead to conflict and violence. One of the appropriate theoretical approaches to explaining, understanding, and resolving religious related conflicts and violence is the conflict theory with micro (psycho-spiritual) and macro (socio-cultural) features germane to analyzing internal and external conflicts generated by religious humans. It is appropriate in interpreting psychological and sociological conflicts associated with religious experience. It is argued, therefore, that there is a matrix between religious experience and the use of conflict theory in the interpretation of conflicts (intrapersonal and interpersonal) arising from religious experience.

Introduction

The rate of production and sophistication of technology in modern times makes some people think that religion and religious experience do not occupy a central position in the analysis of social phenomena such as conflict and violence. This cannot be accepted as the whole truth. Johnstone (2004) says that in spite of technological advancements and the projections of the decline of religion in the contemporary world there is still “continuity in the traditional social functions of religion” (p. 362). James (1977) also says that “Today, quite as much as at any previous age the religious individual tells you that the divine meets him on the basis of his personal concerns” (p. 469). Two points are discernible from this statement which extends to all mankind in all cultural space and time: first, the divine “meet” humans; second, the divine does this to satisfy “personal concerns”. Man’s relationship with the divine is clearly on personal grounds. On the personal ground, man often encounters the divine in a somewhat different manner from the normal. In other words man “experiences” the divine. And it is because this “experiencing” involves the “divine”, the “sacred”, that it is called “religious experience”. Here the “divine” is the “sacred”. In the words of Allen (1972) relying on Eliade (1961):

The sacred may be described as that which is experienced as “power” (van der Leeuw), as “wholly other” (Otto), as “ultimate reality” (Wach). In other religious texts it is described by such terms as “absolute reality”, “being”, “eternity”, “divine”, “metacultural and transhistorical”, “transhuman”, “transmundane”, “source of life and fecundity”. (pp. 176-177).

In the view of Allen (1972), the sacred-profane distinction, though not always enough to define the phenomenon of religion, is always involved in every definition of religion. Every definition of religion therefore “has its own way of showing that the sacred and the religious life are the opposite of the profane and the secular life” (p. 176). Based on this, Eliade (1960) gives the conception of *religious* as that which does not necessarily imply belief in God, gods, of ghosts, but refers to the experience of the sacred.

The idea of experiencing the divine is also evident in the clearly psychological definition of religion given by James (1977). He defines religion as “the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever

they may consider the divine". This "experience" of individual men of the "sacred", the "divine" and other descriptions of the sort, is religious in character. It is "religious experience". Every religious phenomenon has basis on this experience, be it creed or ritual. A study of religious experience, therefore, is the study of the "fundamentally irreducible character" of religion and religious phenomenon. Such interrogative statements in the Christian religion as "Are you born again?" and "Have you received Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour" appear to be invitation to religious experience. Such provocative statements as "Church will not save you", "those who use images worship idols", "mushroom churches", and "I will dip the Koran in the Atlantic Ocean", appear to indicate that "my" religious experience is better than "yours". Such Christian songs as "Thank you, thank you very much, since you touched my life I have never been the same" and "O di m ka m no n'igwe ugbu a" (I feel I am in heaven right now) are seemingly expressions of satisfaction at religious experience. And such mortality acts of such people as Usman Dan Fodio, Jim Jones, "Maitetsine", and currently, Osama bin Laden indicate the psycho-social problematic of religious experience. These statements, songs and actions are aspirations (desires), fulfillments or effects of experiences which certain people have had and which experiences they have considered religious in the sense of being related to the divine as here explained. Most times the actual experiences engender conflicts of lesser or higher magnitude on those who experience them and through them their human environment. That has been the genesis of religious wars and conflicts through history. These conflicts are not merely social, political, economic or cultural. They are **religious** as such. If religious experience underpins every religious phenomenon it means that religious conflicts are to be analyzed from the standpoint of religious experience using a theory that fits the content of religious experiences. The theory found most appropriate is the conflict theory.

Conceptual Issues:

For the purpose of this paper *conflict* would be viewed from two perspectives- psychological and social. The two represent the basic interactive and communicative element in humans on whose elements rest the divide into micro and macro conflict theorists. They equally aid any meaningful analysis of the effects of religious experience. Other views on conflict such as cultural, economic, political, and religious are weaved into these two. For instance, the cultural milieu is ever maintained by the cognitive traits in humans as well as the social interaction arising from the

perception they generate. Economic and political frustration can, no doubt, lead to instant or gradual religious experience but then frustration is purely psychological and discernible in avoidance attitude in social interaction. Social conflicts are, therefore, more often than not, outflows of psychological (intra-personal) conflicts. When Weber (1992) talked of “several motives and social interactions (that) set the stage for conflict” (p. 231), the interpretation cannot but be of psychic intentions (motive) that lead to modes of social interaction that could be conflictual. Added to this is the fact that every religious experience goes with it psychological (individual) and social (institutions, collectivities) consequences. That is why these two perspectives constitute the two broad divides of conflict theorists into “micro” – and “macro”- theorists.

The *micro-theorists* of conflict - psychologists, biologists, games theorists and decision-making theorists - seek the origin of conflict in the nature of man taking as their point of departure the behaviour of individuals; from this, inferences are drawn to the behaviour of the species. The *macro-theorists* on the other hand – sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, political scientists and international relations analysts and systems theorists - seek the origin of conflicts in human institutions, at the level of groups, collectivities, social institutions, social classes, large political movements, religious and ethnic entities, nation-states, coalitions and cultural systems. Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (1971) who made this broad classification hold that historically there was intellectual chasm between the micro and the macro perspectives of human conflict as clearly illustrated in the earlier polarity of psychology and sociology. According to them,

The psychologist tended to approach human problems as arising from the inner psychic structure of the individual, from where he thought that complexes, tensions and other disorders were projected into the external social situation. The sociologist conversely was disposed to begin his analysis of all human problems at the level of social structures and institutions, and to trace the effects of disorder at that level back to the psychic life of the individual. (p. 140).

At the present age of interdisciplinary approach in research some bridge is, however, built between the two. There is inter-dependence. One can now think of psycho-social approach in the study of conflict. This means that the

totality of the internal and external environment of humans as crisscrossing in conflict situations is taken into consideration when analyzing conflicts. This is where religion as an element spanning human's internal and external environment becomes the centre-point for the noumenal and the phenomenal at the vertical dimension and interaction between humans at the horizontal level. Adapting conflict theory to the field of religious science as a malting point for unified acceptable method of investigation is therefore important. Dougherty and Pfaltzgraft (1971) have already said that "it is impossible to construct an adequate theory of conflict without fusing the macro and the micro dimensions into a coherent whole" (p.141). One may then ask: What is conflict?

Conflict

It is not the intention here to give author by author definition of conflict; that has been done elsewhere (Obiefuna, 2005). However, some psychological and sociological definitions will be taken here to indicate the micro and macro levels of human environment.

Murray (1972) says that "conflict refers to a situation in which a person is motivated to engage in two or more mutually exclusive activities" (p.220). This is a psychological definition of conflict by the fact "a person is motivated". Religious experience, as will be seen, is a function of the psychic process. It can "motivate" a person to mutually exclusive thoughts and actions. On the other hand, Coser (1972) sees conflict from the social point of view and says it is "a struggle over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources" (p. 232). Weber (1992) simply says, "Conflict is the experience of tension in incompatible goals between two or more individuals or groups" (p. 229). In both cases, conflict is not something that is simply happening inside a person. They refer to social values that are open to the public. That is why those who struggle over them do not only aim at gaining the desired value but are ready to injure or eliminate those who struggle with them; or, at best, neutralize these rivals.

There is no doubt that religion gives, or enhances, people's status, power and control of scarce resources including audience and followership. It has equally been a source of much psychotic cases and social upheavals that lead to maiming and killing. One thing that is clear is that whether conflict is seen as a "motivation" to engage in mutually exclusive activities, or as a "struggle", or as a "tension", the underlying factor is that there is opposition of forces of competing values which can be intrapersonal or interpersonal.

The key word in the study of conflict - psychological, social, political, cultural, anthropological or religious – is therefore **opposition**. People are divided into opposing groups: “Born-again” and “non born – again”, Christians and non- Christians, Catholic and non-Catholic Christians, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the heavenly and the earthly. If opposition is fundamental in the definition of conflict and if, as Onyeneke (1996) says, “the principle for the division of people into opposing groups should not be based on one factor but on several and multiple factors at the same time” (p. 66), then there should be a definition of conflict that will not be compartmentalized. One cannot but agree with Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (1971) that it is this compartmentalized definition of conflict (as given from various disciplines) that makes some scholars believe there is no general theory of conflict.

It is the view of this paper that conflict is of *a situation* in a person or community of persons which situation is discernible; it is a situation that calls for choice of interest or value which the person or community of persons considers primary in their assessment of worth; the interest of values therefore hangs on a scale and could be won or lost. For the purposes of this presentation, therefore:

Conflict is a discernible situation whereby two or more forces of interest or values, material or nonmaterial, are opposed, one to the other in the overall perception of an individual person or group of persons who consider such interests or values primary.

This definition, it is argued, cuts across disciplines and serves the purpose of analyzing and interpreting religious experience which can expose a person or community of persons to the opposition of the forces of light or darkness, God and Satan, healthy-mindedness and divided self, recanting the behaviour arising from the experience and sticking to the “new self” or “new community”. The “perception” that leads to conflict could be *within* a person or a group of persons; *between* a person and a group of persons, or between individual persons or defined groups of persons. There are reasons for this “perception” and consequent conflicts.

Sources of Conflict

Conflict can be occasioned in human persons and communities through many sources. Nader (1972) says situations of conflict rest on “the aggressive nature of man” (p. 236) which exposes him to competing for incompatible

claims and desires. In other words, conflict is innate in humans. For Coser (1972), conflict germinates on the fertile ground of unequal “distribution of a great variety of scarce values and goods, such as income, status, power, dominion over territory, or ecological position” (p. 233). North (1972) says that “conflict arises from what parties *think* may happen –from their anxieties, prejudices, fears and uncertainties rather than any phenomenon that is actually threatening” (p. 227). In this case there could be no actual situation of conflict. Imagined situation of conflict more often than not creates and aggravates real conflict. Weber (1992) adds scarcity, revenge, attribution, and miscommunication as eminently contributing to conflict.

Other sources of conflict include feelings of inadequacy and alienation in a functional and dynamic community (as in religious communities) where integration is expected but lacking. Frustration and despair can lead to antagonism. Strong desire and yearning to be united with the Divine is another source of conflict. Such Biblical passages as Psalm 42:2; Mt. 10:37; Jn. 3:5; 2 Cor. 4:7 and 5:8 point to that. For instance, Mt. 10:37 warns parents of losing the kingdom of heaven should they love their children more than Christ and the children of such loss if they love their parents more. The desire for this union underpins the fever-point quest to be “born again”, to have an encounter with God, to have a religious experience, and, in the words of Kentenich (1998), “to live constantly with God” (p. 81). The desire for religious experience and the desire also to translate the content of religious experience into real life creates opposition/conflict of values within and among individuals. Religious conflicts come from these sources too, that touch on the overall psycho-social component of humans. They are religious simply because the motivation, the process, and the goal rest on religious ideals as modeled on a person’s or a group’s religious experiences. These conflicts take many shapes.

Types of Conflict

Scholars outline various forms of conflict depending on the discipline and methods of theoretical orientation. Coser (1972), for instance, distinguishes between realistic and nonrealistic conflicts. *Realistic conflict* occurs when men oppose themselves in the pursuit of claims and the expectation of gain. It is seen as a means of achieving specific goals. Such means could be dropped if better alternatives are at hand. *Nonrealistic conflict*, on the other hand, does not aim at achieving any concrete result but at whatever object (human) on which to express aggressive impulse. This explains why at times people appear to be at odds fighting persons instead of issues. Some of the

persons with religious experience sometimes run into conflict with some institutionalized church authorities not necessarily because of doctrine or practice but in the bid to parade their newfound religious “power”. The only solution to this kind of conflict would be complete capitulation or segregation since the “power” touches on the core of one’s personality which generally enjoys social status.

In a highly competitive situation, Weber (1992) opines, conflict can be a “zero – sum” or “mixed – motive” affair. If it is *zero – sum*, which is a real conflict, the winner takes all because what he gains the other party loses so that the sum of their outcomes is zero. In *mixed – motive*, there is a win-versus-lose struggle. What favours one party may be disadvantageous to others. In that case solution is difficult because there is “no solution that leaves everyone feeling happy and satisfied” (p. 230). For instance, the religious experience that leads to the founding of new religious groups will continually hurt the parent community that resolution of their differences will remain, at best, uneasy.

It has already been pointed out that types of conflict could go along specific disciplinary areas of particular theoretical formulations. In this line one can conveniently talk of political conflict, economic conflict, psychological conflict and religious conflict. As religious sentiments manifest themselves in the multi-dimensional character of humans, it means that a study of the irreducible element in religion, religious experience, aids an understanding of these other structural types of conflict. That will be a holistic interpretation of fundamental opposing forces in human situation, the forces of conflict. The next section explains the nature of religious experience.

Religious Experience

Located within General Human Experiences:

Religious experience as a concept cannot be understood outside broader concepts of human experience. Eliade (1987) gives the English word “experience” as deriving from the Greek *emperia*, translated into Latin as *experientia*. Originally the word designated “the action of testing or proof by actual trial (experimenting)” (p. 323). As time progressed it came to mean, more generally, “the actual observation of acts or events considered to be the source of knowledge, or the fact of consciously being the subject of a state or condition, or of consciously being affected by an event” (p. 323). From this definition, experience *is* a conscious activity. The implication is that no

creatures other than humans undergo an “experience” for only humans are ever conscious; only humans have the capability of abstraction and symbol formation. Based on this, experience can be understood in both primary and secondary senses.

On its *primary* meaning, according to Eliade (1987), experience is “the actual living through an event or events, actual enjoyment or suffering, hence, the effect upon the judgment or feeling produced by personal or direct impressions”. On the *secondary* level it is “the sum total of the conscious events which compose an individual life” (p. 323). Sublime in these definitions is “actual living through” or ‘direct impressions’. The scope covers all “enjoyments and sufferings” of an individual.

Experience is, however, not just of subjective consciousness; there is equally group or community consciousness. For instance it is clearly subjective to have some deep internal and personal urge to read the Sacred Book or to pray. It is community experience when there is an epidemic that claims many lives and urges people to communal ritual activity. Religious experience goes in that dimension too - personal and group. In either case conflicts are wont to erupt especially when there is demand for or actual sudden change in personal and social behaviour. This is where the micro and the macro dimensions of conflict and the dimensions of religious experience converge. And just like conflict is at the basis of the dynamics of every society, religious experience is the master key to the understanding of religion.

The Content of Religious Experience

Berthold (1952) says that anxiety is essential in religious experience. It takes two forms: natural anxiety and divine anxiety. *Natural anxiety* reflects anxious desire which by means of clinical observation is a kind of substitute wish replacing some instinctual wish in humans. This state in a personality introduces a conflictual situation that is not acceptable to the conscious self. It is an experience alright but to be explained, as a sublimation of instinctual energy which has taken the form of religious “wishful thinking”. This is psychological explanation of experience.

In *divine anxiety*, however, Berthold (1952) says, “God or, a divine Reality, reveals himself to a soul that the delectation makes the soul find content only in him” (p. 263). It is understood from the nature of God and also from the nature of the soul. God reveals himself and the soul in that revelation is enraptured in “fascinans, mysterium et tremendum”, as Otto (1971) would put it. In this enrapture there is a union of the divine with the soul through a

revelatory experience that nothing earthly could be compared with. This is theological or ontological explanation of experience. From this it would appear that there are two basic forms of religious experience- one psychological, the other theological or ontological. But there is no dualism. Conceptually they could be distinguishable. They are, however, not distinct in manifestation in human society.

From Kristo (1982), religious experience could be called *mystical experience* or *ecstatic experience*. The question is whether it is a passing phase constituting part of stories one has to tell in one's life or whether it is a permanent feel of realization or actualization or an anxiety, an aspiration. Kristo sees religious experience as a story in one's life that is not unconnected with one's story of the past that was momentous. For Kristo (1982), therefore,

Mystical experience...is a determinate point in a person's story which must draw its richness from the elements which constituted the story in the past and which constitute it in the present. The story is a story of broadening of horizons and mystical experience is a moment in a personal story with a specific horizon. (p. 22).

Religious experience then "is primarily and most importantly a state or a point in life in which one lives one's life in the consciousness that God is one's ultimate horizon" (p. 22). This means that this person sees things only from the vision of God from the point at which he/she has the religious experience. That point is the "determinate standpoint" around which the story of one's life revolves, from birth to deterioration.

Kristo (1982) coined the nomenclature, "universes of meaning", to identify the "worlds" in which humans live and within which they have their experiences. According to him, a number of these universes of meaning are formed in a lifetime; no human experience, religious and otherwise, is had outside the universes of meaning as conditioned by cultural, historical, philosophical, and religious presuppositions and assumptions. These are constitutive elements in the physical, moral, aesthetical and intellectual dimensions of life which aid discipline, concentration, and orientation necessary for the realization of religious experience. They are part and parcel of preparatory ground for religious experience. He says clearly that

It is decisive to realize that a religious and philosophical outlook, or metaphysico-theological doctrine, in which one participates and by which one is formed, is one of the most important elements of the universe of meaning. One's story is formed and shaped by the community and by the things which are constitutive parts of community itself. (p. 30).

The emphasis here is that a person's religious tradition/background has a lot to contribute to a person's religious experience. All through their works on religious experience, James (1977), Smart (1969), Godin (1985) and Hick (1989), are of the same view. Hick (1989) made the point clearer when he said *inter alia*:

A sense of Christ would, on the face of it be good currency within Christianity, as a sense of the presence of Krishna would be within the Vaishnavite tradition of India but not *vice versa*. Again among the subdivisions of Christianity, a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary could count as a notable divine revelation within the Roman Catholic Church but might well be puzzling and even disturbing if it occurred within, say the Southern Baptist, the Presbyterian or the Quaker bodies. (p. 224).

This is confirmed by Lambek (2002) when he said that "experience is culturally shaped or in dialectical relation to culture, society, and power, not something that exists prior to them" (p. 275). The import of this is that the human environment determines the kind of religious experience one is likely to have.

Kinds of Religious Experience

Hick (1989) makes a classification of religious experience into broad and specific. *Broad* or *general* religious experience (or conviction) indicates that "such experience is not as such or as a whole delusory, not *in toto* a high – level hallucination of religious individuals and communities". It does not, in any case, always mean "simply and without qualification, cognition of the divine" (p. 220). It is, however, an indication that humans are dependent on the divine for life. It is an experience that is trans-cultural and trans-historical. It is from this general experience of the ever dependence of humans on the divine that a great variety of concrete forms of universes of meaning developed within different identifiable religious historical traditions.

Religious experience within these traditions could be called “objective” religious experience.

Specific or *strict* religious experience, on the other hand, refers to the “specific convictions formed within the particular historic traditions and tested by criteria established within them” (p.221). Here, Hick (1989) addresses the fears of some scholars like Hitchcock (1980) who doubt the promptings of religious experience of charismatics and question the criteria applicable in judging its authenticity.

Kristo (1982) delineates three types of religious experience: primary, secondary, and ordinary. The **primary** religious experience gives someone a compelling belief in the existence of God. The one has a well-founded belief. This is evidenced in founders of religion, those with radical conversion and many mystics. Examples include Moses, John of the Cross, St Francis of Assisi, St Augustine, Martin Luther, Usman Dan Fodio, Ramakrishna and so on. These claimed direct experience of the presence of God.

The **secondary** religious experience concerns those who are so impressed by the moral and spiritual fruits of faith in the lives of the saints (pious people) as to be drawn to share, at least tentatively, the latter’s beliefs. This gives room to various spiritualities especially as found in the Roman Catholic Church. Examples include the Marian, Ignatian, or charismatic spiritualities.

Lastly, the **ordinary** or **common sense** religious experience is that of the ordinary believer who has at least some remote echo or analogue within his or her own experience of the much more momentous experience of the great religious figures. This echo does not need to be dramatic or memorable. It is a moment of intensified meaning one had in a Church, Synagogue or Mosque service, in a prayer meeting, in private prayer, when reading a Scripture, or, for Catholics, saying a Rosary. It may also come when a transcendent reality discloses itself at some deep point of human experience like love, birth or death. An insistent pressure of an ideal can lead to practical commitment against some social evil or for the realization of a common good. Some meditations on nature at, for example, starry night, mysterious immensity of space, the presence of mountain, lake, forest, ocean or the sun, can equally impress some religious experience.

Receiving Religious Experience

In all these types of religious experience no one can claim to gaze into the structure of Ultimate Reality, that is, “heaven” in itself, or to have seen the

Ultimate Reality himself – God, Allah and whatever other name it goes with. Infact Kristo (1982) argues that “the claim by either mystics or theoreticians of mystical experience, that mystics have a direct, objectifiable experience of God or the Ultimate Reality is philosophically and theologically untenable” (p. 22). But that is at the level of philosophy as logical sequence of symbolization and theology as scientific discourse of God or Ultimate Reality. Mystics or those having religious experience are in the realm of the spiritual. At that level verification of objectification is ruled out. But that does not also rule out claims of “objectifiable experience”. The fact that others, especially philosophers and theologians, do not see what the mystics say they see does not in any way objectively negate the possibility of their seeing or experiencing something objectively. What they claim to experience nonetheless influences their behaviour. And social analysts, including religious scientists, are interested in the effects of such behaviours as they affect individual attitudes and human relations.

The general acceptance is that the person having religious experience “feels” the intimidating presence of the divine. This feeling influences and modifies his/her horizons of universe of meaning and attitude to life. Sometimes in Christian (charismatic) tradition the people are prepared for the experience through what is generally called “Life in the Spirit Seminar”. This involves prayers, spiritual talks, meditations, fasting, and, at the apex, baptism in the Holy Spirit. It is believed that one who goes through this process gets “born again”, accepts Jesus as personal Lord and Saviour and somehow is sure of heaven. This invariably leads to spiritual enthusiasm that midwives discrimination between the “born agains” and the “non born agains”, the “heavenly” and the “earthly people” within and among some specific faith traditions. There lies the root of conflicts: those with religious experience believe they belong to *light* while those without the experience belong to *darkness*; they are holy while others are sinners; they are in tune with the divine while others are out of tune and need to be purified whatever way.

It is the struggle, the tension, and the opposition in the pursuit of supernatural values for natural comforts that makes religious experience germane to conflict. Speaking with regard to charismatics in Christianity, Hichcock and Bednarski (1980) say religious experience is more often than not associated with conflict as members generally confess having experienced a sense of confusion and rootlessness before their conversions, and manifest a “crisis mentality”, in which they are required to choose between God and evil. A choice for God provides them with a source of infallible authority on

heavenly matters. Belief in this “infallible authority” and the attempt to use it or actual use of it generally cause conflict. This means that the sense of guilt can also lead to religious experience.

Authenticity of Religious Experience

As a traditional Christian, Hick (1989) holds that the major criteria for establishing the authenticity of religious experience within Christianity were conformity with the Scripture and the Churches’ authoritative interpretation of the provisions of the Scriptures. He uses St Theresa of Avila as example of the proof these criteria. For him, Theresa says she is convinced that a thing is from God only if it is in conformity with the scriptures; anything more than that is from the devil. Again, Jesus already said: “By their fruit you shall know them” as no one picks grapes from thorns or figs from thistles (Mt. 7:16).

For St Paul, the Holy Spirit in the life of the person or community that is having the experience permits the utterance, “Jesus is Lord” and never curse Jesus (1 Cor. 12:3). An experience is also judged authentic if the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control, as listed by Paul (Gal 5:22) are evident.

The Conflict Character of Religious Experience

It is relevant to reemphasize that religious experience contains some elements of conflict. It does not matter the person with the experience conforms to societal norms or revolts against them. If he conforms he will be charged withdrawing into himself and of being over pious. If he revolts a greater percentage of the population will attack him and if he succeeds in gathering followers he is most likely to indoctrinate them into being very daring. In this last case the conflict will be more violent.

It could be demonstrated from Scriptural and extra-Scriptural incident that religious experience is conflict laden. When Moses had his religious experience it raised serious conflict between him and the Israelites on the one hand and Pharaoh and the Egyptians on the other. The climax of the conflict was the Red Sea episode (Ex 14:5-31). The conflict arose because the Israelites did not believe him and Pharaoh felt his power was being challenged and his constituency insecure as Moses made the Israelites to rebel the orders of the king and his task masters. Moses paid the ultimate prize for it.

The prophets of the Old Testament found themselves at conflict with their various audiences. One thinks of the embittered Amaziah, priest of Bethel, who had brushes with Amos, the prophet from Tekoa who had his religious experience and commissioning as he carried out his duty of dressing sycamore tree. Amaziah reported Amos to king Jeroboam for “conspiracy” just because of perceived close of, or competition with, his (Amaziah’s) source of income: deception and feeding on people’s ignorance. Impatient with the king’s reaction Amaziah confronted Amos with the warning: “Off with you, seer, go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there y prophesying. But never again prophesy at Bethel for it is a king’s sanctuary and a national shrine” (Amos 7: 12-13). Here Amaziah felt his position threatened. And threat is one of the indicators of conflict.

The story of the conflict between Elijah and Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, together with the prophets of Baal is familiar to most Christians. They opposed themselves over the worship of the true God (1 Kgs. 18 -19). In fact, Ahab called Elijah “the plague of Israel” (1 Kgs. 18:17). Name-calling indicates conflict situation and equally exacerbates it. And Elijah flees to Horeb as the prophets of Yahweh fought and killed the prophets of Baal. **Fighting** and **killing** are, of course, extreme forms of conflict. The stories of both the major and the minor prophets are not different. They carried out their divine mandate in opposition to the popular life styles of most of the priests, political leaders, and peoples of their times.

In the New Testament, attention is drawn to John the baptizer. John had his religious experience in the wilderness where the word of God came to him and “he went through the whole of Jordan district proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Lk 1: 80 and 3: 2-4). With this experience, John who lived a hidden life in the wilderness (one of the ways of receiving the experience) was emboldened to call his kith and kin “brood of vipers”, and to use such offensive and, therefore, conflict-laden words and phrases as “axe”, being “cut down and thrown on the fire”, “winnowing fan”, and “burning in a fire that will never go out” on those of them who “fail to produce good fruit” and are “chaff”. Possibly unknown to John, he creates, or exacerbates, internal conflict in each of his audience and eventual intergroup conflict between those who “fly from the retribution that is coming” (the saved “who produce good fruit” and are “wheat for the barn”) and those who may not have the wing to fly, the “chaff” that will burn forever in the fire (Lk 3: 7 – 18). He saw King Herod a neighbour that needed conversion. In the process he stepped on the toes of angered Herodias who perceived she would

lose authority, status and fame if Herod were converted. John paid capitally for it. (Mt. 14:1-12).

Jesus, the Christ, had his religious experience at his baptism by John in River Jordan when “the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. And a voice spoke from heaven, ‘This is my Son, the beloved; my favour rests on him’” (Mt 3:16 – 17). This Mathean narrative appears to indicate that the voice was heard by some or all who stood there. On this basis John the baptizer claims to have seen the Spirit come from heaven like a dove to rest on Jesus (Jn 3: 32). It could, however, be said that John was struggling to authenticate his claim as the precursor and witness to Christ as “the Chosen one of God” (Jn 3:34). Even at that, Mark and Luke make Jesus’ experience very personal to him. They reported that the voice assured him: “You are my Son, the beloved; my favour rests on you (Mk 1:11; Lk 1:22; cf Ps 2:7).

That was the personal experience of Jesus that led him into the desert and which experience was confirmed authentic as he firmly stood the tests of the devil in the “wilderness”. He then set about changing the cognitive pattern of the Jews: they believed themselves God’s chosen and therefore could lord it over others, perpetrate injustices though meticulously keeping to ritual observances. Mt. 4:17 says: “from that time on Jesus began to proclaim his message, “change your ways: the kingdom of Heaven is near”” (cf Lk 17:20 and Mk 115). The Jewish people, especially the Pharisees and the Saducees, could not smile with His proclamation. Their long tradition was being challenged; their pride in Yahweh being punctured, and their social positions put on the balance. Like his precursor John, Jesus accuses both the religious and political leaders of the Jews of hypocrisy; he uses clearly indicting parables on them (Mt 14 – 25). Oppositions (conflicts) ensued. Jesus paid the price by crucifixion on the Cross.

Before his death, Jesus already collected some followers: apostles and disciples. He prepared them for their own religious experience through teaching (by word and miracles), prayers (they prayed often and he taught them the *Pater Noster*), meditation and fasting. Infact he taught them to *die* for their religious convictions as he would. Of course he taught them that they were not of this world just because His Kingdom was not of this world, and that he that hated life in this world would have it in eternity (Jn 18:36, 12:25). They were to *die* for what He taught them. Martyrdom is one of the

fruits of religious experience, individual or group. He addressed his followers thus:

Fortunate are you when people insult you and persecute you and speak all kinds of evil against you because you are my followers. Be glad and joyful for a great reward is kept for you in God. This is how this people persecuted the prophets who lived before you. (Mt 5:11-12).

The apostles had their religious experience with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). That gave them the audacity to confront the Jews before whom they were afraid. History has it that all the apostles, except John, died the martyr's death. Even, they thanked God and rejoiced "that they were considered worthy to suffer disgrace for the sake of the Name" and had to "obey God rather than men" (Acts 4:41 & 29). Of course, to differentiate between the will of God and the will of men (especially that of the person that claims religious experience) remains most times a strong source of religious conflict.

Saul of Tarsus had his religious experience on his way to fight Christians in Damascus (Act 9). The old life left him; he became Paul and turned around to fight Judaism which course he promoted. He was glad to suffer all he did (2 Cor. 11); for nothing, including death, could separate him from the love of God (Rm 8:35-39). His experience was so impressive that he set about turning around much for which Judaism was known. The Jews saw him as a cultural rebel causing socio – cultural and religious upheaval and killed him

The history of Christianity, especially early Christianity, is replete with stories of those who died for "the faith". In the Middle Ages it was the crusades. Most of the crusaders died for religious convictions flowing from primary, secondary or ordinary levels of religious experience. Today it is a popular saying that "the blood of Martyrs is the seed of Christianity". Those "martyrs" however appear to have died out of conflict with various traditional religions, other religions, or other faith traditions within Christianity. The spirit of martyrdom is still in Christianity. One recalls with pain the gruesome murder of two promising young people, Augustine and Scholastica, at Nanka in 1994. As members of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, they had their religious experience in "baptism in the Holy Spirit". Out of that experience, they died "for God". They were said to have died "in defence of the faith", that is, a martyr's death. It was, however, a clear case of

conflict arising from perspectives in religious experience: the one Christian and the other traditional.

Before the Bakassi Boys killed him, Prophet Edward Okeke popularly called Eddy Nawgu, ran into conflict with the Catholic Church not only in Nawgu but with parishes within and beyond Igboland. His religious experience made him believe he had such “spiritual powers” that no other person in his time had. To consolidate those powers, he used questionable religious symbols and threats to life to attract followership. Women were beaten to succumb. Families were torn apart. The Catholic Church in the area vehemently stood against such method of proselytisation. Overt conflicts ensued. In 1987, members of the Awka Diocesan Catholic Charismatic Renewal, possibly filled with the wine of their own religious experience, went to Nawgu “to pray”. The “prophet” and his followers *literally* fought them. Some of his cases with the Catholic Church are still in courts.

The Christian religion has been primarily used to buttress the point that religious experience at whatever level engenders some kind of conflict. It is equally the case in other religions. In Islam, for example, when Mohammed had his experience of total surrender to Allah, he saw every other person who did not “accept Allah as the one God and Mohammed as his prophet” an infidel. He fought vehemently in the Arabian Peninsula to plant, consolidate and expand Islam. His followers fought and destroyed Christianity in North Africa. The Jihad of Usman Dan Fodio in Nigeria was as a result of his religious experience. Mohamed Marwa, Maitetsine, had his religious experience and unleashed religious conflicts in Nigeria in the 1980s. Conflicts associated with Sharia implementation in some States in Northern Nigeria could be blamed on religious experience. The Middle East crises appear to rest on fundamentalism and fanaticism consequent on religious experiences of both leaders and followers in Judaism and Islam. The upheaval caused by Osama bin Laden in America on 11th September 2001 was a result of religious enthusiasm which may have political overtone but resting on his religious experience.

It would appear that those with religious experience are fanatics. There is no doubt that in every religion there are fanatics. Fanaticism and religious experience are, however, not synonymous. Both are nonetheless fertile grounds for conflict. Many of other conflicts in the world today cannot be fully comprehended and managed unless interpreted from the perspective of religious experiences of the principal actors. The conflicts associated with

religious experiences are no longer subtly covert. They are discernible and as such analyzable.

The Relevance of Conflict Theory in Interpreting Religious Experience

Conflict theory as a micro – macro framework of analysis addresses the basic issues in religious experience. As an attempt in understanding and explanation, with a view to application, conflict theory is used to explain, in the view of James (1977), “the reality of the unseen”, “the divided self, and the process of its unification”, “the divided self, and the process of its unification”, or of “conversion”, “saintliness” and “mysticism” of religious experiences. Conflict theory is equally useful in explaining some forms of perceptual error - misperceptions, mistakes, illusions and hallucinations - that often goes with religious experiences as stated by Hick (1989). This is why an understanding of the universe of meaning of the person with the experience is very important. It aids an appreciation of the person’s background and the milieu that generated the experience. More often than not religious experiences generate psychological and social conflicts which are deeply perceived in man’s innermost seat of consciousness (the spiritual, the religious). They influence human relations in such a way that there is discernible opposition. Opposition is the primary characteristic of conflict as here explained. Conflict theory as a framework of analysis then becomes appropriate in analyzing religious experiences in order to understand and explain the source, nature and kind of conflict as matched with the source, nature and kind of religious experience. This helps the prevention or management of religion-related conflicts. The analysis can take either of two forms: *micro-level* and *macro-level*. Sometimes both levels can be operational in one analysis though one could be dominant.

At the *micro-level* is the religious experience of individual persons which can be seen as a gradual or radical conversion. The effect of this kind of religious experience on the individual could be either positive (healthy-mindedness and saintliness) or negative (sick soul and divided self). In either effect, there is a reaction that is invariably conflictual. The conflict could come from the individual who sees himself as different (religiously) from the rest of the people. He is a saint. Others are sinners. He starts to withdraw himself from these “sinners” in a way of avoidance. On the other hand he could be revolutionary after the experience. The conflict could also be caused by his community which could perceive this member, correctly or wrongly, as not only being off his senses and as such should be helped but equally as a deviant destroying the perceived social cohesion of the community. The

community could also see him as a “traitor” who brings to light all that the community does in the cover of night (Rm. 12:1-2). If the “deviant” collects some followers and the community is bent on beating them into conformity, the conflict is most likely to exacerbate.

Though micro-level conflict does not generally engender serious social upheaval it can, sometimes, spiral into conflict of greater magnitude. To prevent or manage this kind of conflict the background to the religious experience has to be determined: it could be unsatisfied yearning for God, Deprivations, Low self esteem, Quest for power, Reaction to parental or pastoral high handedness or neglect or struggle for equal rights and justice.

At the macro-level the conflict is no longer strictly personal. Though every religious experience is personal it is had within a community. Members of a community may severally have religious experience. In that case some would be more religiously experienced than others. Their experience is at the primary level. They are clearly charismatic. Others who desire or are talked into desiring spiritual experiences look up to them as communication lines of divine inspiration and infilling. There could be opposing teachings and practices. The result could be banding together and mutual oppositions. One person may even exhibit more spiritual power than others. In either case there would be struggle for followership. The analysis is likely to focus on the struggle for authority, status, and wealth which is amenable to the content of conflict theory.

Religious experiences, whether personal or communal, therefore, are to be viewed from the perspectives of the victim’s historical tradition to analyze the opposing forces - psychological and social – working in the person or community for, or against power, status, wealth or fame. Once there is discernible opposition conflict theory can be used for interpretation. For effective analysis, however, it is expected that the analyst is at grips with specific models of conflict theory to see which one best suits the analysis of specific intra or interpersonal conflicts arising from specific religious experiences. Of recommended importance is the more integrative conflict theory of Collins (1975) who sees social structure and the actor as inseparable and as such focuses on social stratification. The inseparability of social structure and the actor (the person involved) agrees with the character of religious experience which takes place only within social milieu. The authority model of Dahrendorf (1959) is equally important since those who claim religious experience equally command religious, and by extension,

societal authority. Coser's (1956) model has the strength of indicating that conflicts, even as arising from religious experience, serve some functional purposes. Theoretically, therefore, conflict theory is relevant in the analysis of religious experience and its resultant impact on human relations.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that conflict theory is appropriate in analyzing issues related to religious experience because religious experience is conflict laden.

It is able to do this because of discernible oppositions associated with religious experiences. Its concern is not religious experiences as such but the relational processes consequent on them. In other words, it is interested in the effects of religious experiences. These effects are psychological and societal as much as they are ontological because they flow naturally from the psychological and ontological understanding and explanation given to the meaning of religious experiences. These effects cannot be analyzed within the framework of conflict theory if they do not show themselves, that is, if they are not phenomenological in character. This is because, as Hirsch (1975) holds, the phenomenological meaning of religious experience presents religious experience as it appears to observation. It does not analyze religious experience in terms of subject and object, that is on the vertical dimension.

Though the object of religious experience is beyond (transcendental to) the subject of such experience the experience is made concrete in the subject. The "what appears", what "stands out" in the experience is analyzable through observing the subject which impacts the experience, that is, the union or communion of the subject and the object, on the immediate human environment. It is the communication of the experience that is the subject of analysis.

Religious experience as such, presents difficulties of holistic analysis within any theoretical framework because of subject - object compartments. Such frameworks as are psychological, historical, and even theological, suffer from reductionism. Conflict theory is interdisciplinary and as such adequate for the analysis of such a multidisciplinary stranded phenomenon as religious experience and its impact on human society. Religious experience is of course conflict laden. Around it revolves other religiously related conflicts. A veritable theoretical framework for its analysis is, therefore, important and is located in conflict theory.

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